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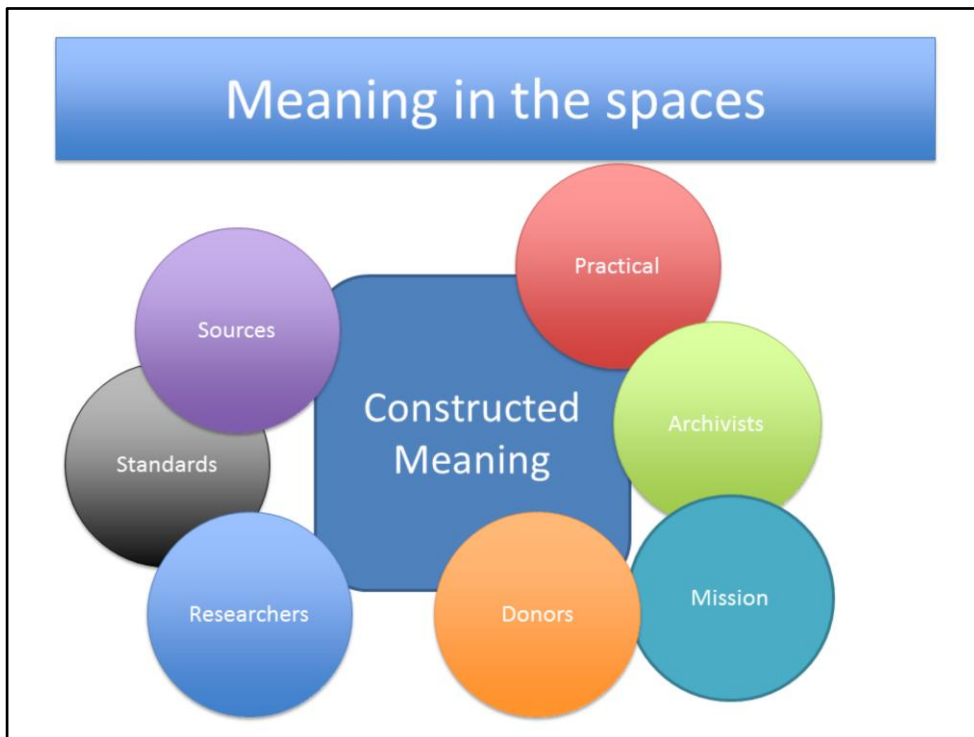
Meaning in the Spaces: Archivists' Impact on the Historical Record

Ruth Bryan
October 3, 2015
Kentucky Association of Teachers of
History

Archivists work in and with Archives

- “The Archives”
- Place, stuff, a repository, a profession
- Stuff = created and acquired by people and organizations
- Primary source = first-person documentation of human life

The approach I’m taking in this workshop is that archives, and “the archives,” are culturally-specific places and materials. In the same way, both individual archivists and users of archives are situated in specific, often different, contexts of culture and identity.



Archives are, also, of course, spaces where researchers encounter sources for creating history. Thus, as both archival professionals and users of archival material, the meanings we construct for ourselves through understanding our past (i.e. interpreting the experiences of the past in relation to the present and/or our expectations for the future) can be thought of as being constantly generated in the ever-changing spaces within and across archival sources, where individual donors, archivists, and researchers, archival professional standards, daily practical needs, and repositories' organizational missions interact. As each source, each archivist, each donor, each researcher are unique individuals with specific cultural and subject identities and positions, archivists' actions in relation to sources have a clear impact on the historical record.

Many theories posit this idea of meaning in the spaces or dialogic meaning including Homi K. Bhabha's Third Space (*The Location of Culture*, 1994); Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogic self identify (*Problems of Dostoyevsky's Art*, 1929); and Lisa Brochu and Tim Merriman's triangular definition of cultural heritage communication between visitor, interpreter, and cultural heritage resource (*Personal Interpretation*, 2008).

Major archival spaces (functions)



In this session, we're going to take a look specifically at three archival functions, thinking of them as spaces of constructed meaning with ramifications for the use and understanding of archives as historical sources.

Description



- Provenance
 - The individual, family, or organization that created or received the items in a collection.
 - Records of different origins (provenance) be kept separate to preserve their context.
- Original order
 - The organization and sequence of records established by the creator of the records.
- Finding Aids or Collection guides

Why do description?

- Because collections are maintained by provenance and in original order
- But research is often by subject or format
- Sheer number of items



Because archives keep collections by **provenance**, the actual content of the collection can be as varied as the human lives that created the documents. Since researchers are often looking for cross-collection subjects or formats, our description is key to helping them locate material that might be useful to them. Also, because by definition archival collections are unique—because each collection stems from unique creators—our description is also key to helping researchers evaluate the relevance of each collection to their research: is a visit or a request for copies worth the effort and cost? Or, do we have the specific item they need for their class paper or their UK administration board report that's due tomorrow?

Why do description?

- We serve lots of different types of researchers with different searching techniques and expertise and different questions
 - Searching: I want my specific item now
 - Browsing: I have a research question and want to explore and thoroughly understand your collections that pertain to my topic



So, researchers or patrons have different needs and levels of research experience, and our description is attempting to serve them all.

Description challenges

- WORDS!



Relationship of Future to the Past

Description Exercise 1

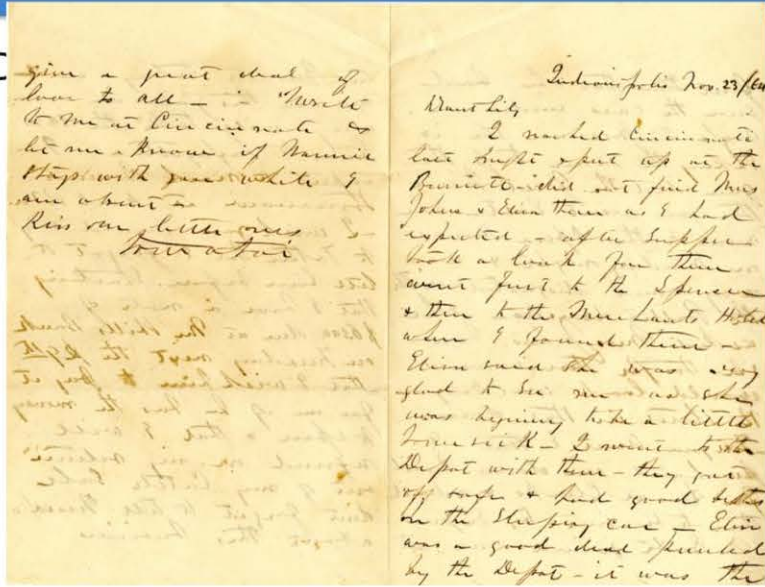
- Use old and new finding aid for the Thomas Henry Hines papers to find:
 - Is there correspondence from John Hunt Morgan?
 - Are there any Civil War military orders?

What is description?

Questions	Possible answers
Who?	Creator/collector, other significant people or names, roles
What?	Title of collection, size of collection, subjects, events, content, physical formats, gaps, functions
When?	Dates of collection, other dates, eras/time periods, educated guesses
Where?	Significant places
Standards	DACS, RDA (content); MARC, EAD, DC (structure); LCSH, AAT (authorities)
Summary, Analysis, Evaluation	

Interpretation, Critique	
Why?	Only to explain the context of creation of the documents or gaps

The Art of Description, Ex. 2

- [
 

I give a great deal of
 love to all - in "Murelle"
 to me in Cincinnati &
 let me know if Mammie
 stays with you while I
 am about - I
 Kiss you little ones
 Love a true

Indianapolis Dec. 23/64
 Dear Lily,
 I reached Cincinnati
 late night & put up at the
 "Three Larks" - I found Mrs
 John & Ellen there as I had
 expected - after supper
 took a walk for three
 miles to the "Three Larks" Hotel
 where I found them -
 Ellen said she was very
 glad to see me - she
 was beginning to be a little
 homesick - I went to see
 the put with them - they put
 my things & had good dinner
 on the shipping case - Ellen
 was a good deal surprised
 by the report - it was the

Selection

- Not every document that is created ends up in an archives
- Based in relationship and awareness
- And/Or
- In a records retention schedule

Selection

- Institutional Archives (transfer agreements)
 - Governments, for-profit, nonprofit, religious
- Collecting Repositories (deeds of gift)
 - Geography, Subject, Media
 - Specific individual, group, event, or era
- Combined Institutional and Collecting

Selection questions

Fits mission/collecting policy?	
Significant information?	Content, function/context, use, intellectual duplication
Physical characteristics?	Scarcity, organization, originals/copies, condition
Political ramifications?	Position in institution, impact on future development
Resources needed?	Storage, supplies, preservation, description, expertise
<hr/>	
Content =	Completeness, time span, creator's relationship to topic
Use =	Enduring legal and administrative value; current and potential research clientele
<hr/>	
Guidelines	IRS Form 8283, SAA ethics and values statements, manuals

Selection Case Study 1

- 1 cardboard box of 8 scrapbooks of newspaper clippings
- Scrapbooks were compiled by a prominent white, female Lexington resident
- Clippings are unlabeled and undated, but were probably compiled 1890s-1910s
- Clippings cover all topics, nonfiction and fiction, prose and poetry
- Clippings appear to be local and national

Selection Case Study 2

- Room full of approximately 250 boxes and plastic containers of VHS videocassette tapes, DVDs, and external hard drives
- Ten years of TV news footage (Sept. 11, 2001 to Oct. 20, 2011) and accompanying closed caption text
- Recorded by John Stagg, Media Archives of Lexington
- From Lexington, KY, television stations WLEX (channel 18, NBC affiliate); WTVQ (channel 36, ABC affiliate), and WKYT (channel 27, CBS affiliate).
- Media Archives of Lexington provided compilations of news stories to various companies, organizations, and lawyers upon request and for a fee.

Research Services

- Closed stacks, non-circulating
- Intellectual: Where acquisitions, description, and research merge
- Physical: Procedures for requesting, paging, tracking, and reproducing material
- Standards for allocating time
- Statistics



Research Services

Facilitate research	Welcoming, "Reference interview," retrievals/returns, reproductions
Educate patrons	Procedures, restrictions/copyright, description tools, managing expectations
Undertake research	Learn the collections, answer specific queries (esp. remote)
Security/preservation	Restrictions, copyright/licensing, physical condition

Guidelines	SAA ethics and values statements, procedures manuals

Research Services Challenges

- Matching patron query/expectations with archivist knowledge/possibilities
- Certainty/Have I found everything?
 - By description
 - By archivist knowledge
 - By citation
 - By word of mouth from colleague or teacher



Research services functions are personal: between individual researchers and individual users.

Research Services Case Study 1

- Your stories AND/OR
- A patron says that 10 years ago, he looked at a manuscript collection that a now-retired archivist located for him.
- The patron doesn't remember the exact name, but remembers the general content.
- In addition, the now-retired staff person allowed the patron to browse in the stacks.

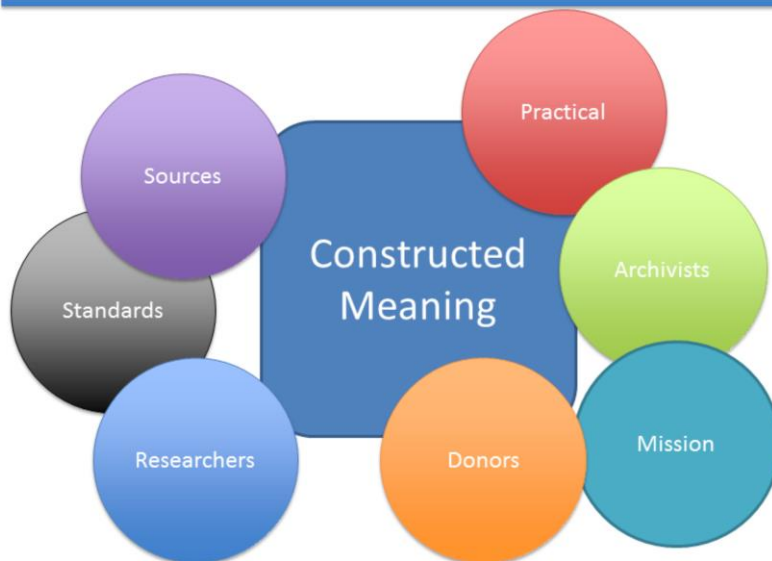
Research Services Case Study 2

- Try to locate a source using online systems OR
- You are working with an undergraduate student, a new researcher.
- You are showing her how to search catalog records, finding aids, and digitized content
- The Office of the President calls. The President is giving a speech to the Board tomorrow and needs specific data on historic buildings on campus right away.

Wrap up: Archives...

- Place, stuff, a repository, a profession
- First-person documentation of human life
- Culturally-specific
- Unique
- Based in and operated through relationships

Wrap up: Relationships/Meaning



As archival functions take place in relationship with unique sources, archivists, donors, researchers and situations, the meanings that we get from archives are also constructed in spaces where relationships ebb and flow. In summary, it is through these relationships and in these spaces that archivists' actions have an impact on the selection, description, and research use of historical sources.

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